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SUBJECT: INDIAN PUBLIC RESPONDING POSITIVELY TO

SINGH-MUSHARAF MEETING

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Classified By: Amb. David Mulford for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

(C) 1. Summary: PM Singh's September 16th meeting with President Musharraf was greeted with a positive spin from the Indian press -- giving him the honeymoon needed to answer hardliners in his own party and move talks forward. Indian commentators say that he has laid the groundwork necessary to revive talks on Siachen, overcoming some of the roadblocks put up by the Indian Army. That said, opposition leaders may be able to rally in the coming days around criticism of PM Singh's efforts to take some of the focus off of Pakistan on terrorism issues. PM Singh's efforts are likely to hinge on Pakistan's ability to stave off new attacks and bring something concrete to the new joint consultative mechanism agreed to in principle in Havana on terrorism. End Summary.

Positive Spin

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(C) 2. The Indian press is filled with positive reports about Prime Minister Singh's meeting with Pakistani President Musharraf in Havana last weekend. Press reports billed India's willingness to set up a counter-terrorism joint consultative mechanism with Pakistan as acceptance that "terrorism in South Asia is a complex phenomenon, rather than a mere product of ISI machinations." For Indian observers, Singh's ability to restart the composite dialogue, while bringing along hardliner National Security Advisor NK

Narayanan, has been billed as a breakthrough in talks. Foreign Secretary-designate Shiv Shankar Menon's immediate addition as a negotiator is also seen as a significant move for PM Singh, ensuring that the Prime Minister will have an ally in the MEA who shares his interest in pushing talks forward.

Terrorism Committee to Placate Critics

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(S) 3. Hindustan Times Foreign Editor Pramit Pal Chaudhuri, known for his inside perspective in the Prime Minister's office, commented that the joint consultative mechanism on terrorism is unlikely to be much more than a token committee "with heads of India's Research and Analysis Wing and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate sitting and staring at one another suspiciously and getting nothing accomplished." That said, he noted that the mechanism allows the Prime Minister to answer to his critics by adding a formal piece to the composite dialogue process that specifically addresses terrorism. This allows Singh to revive stalled talks over Siachen and Sir Creek, which Chaudhuri further commented were very close to resolution.

Opposition Growing

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(S) 4. Opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) President Rajnath Singh held an unusual Sunday conference on September 17th, calling for "double caution" in talks with Pakistan and accusing Singh of giving the impression that the GOI had forgotten the terror victims in Mumbai. Hindustan Times Foreign Editor Chaudhuri further said one BJP official had threatened in an email to hold a sarcastic candle light vigil for Pakistan in response to PM Singh's statement that

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"Pakistan too suffers from terrorism." Chaudhuri also said IB Raman, a former RAW officer who led the agency's Pakistan desk and often represents the hardline in India's intelligence community, was "all over the internet" condemning the meeting. Chaudhuri further commented that despite the Prime Minister's greatest efforts, agreements on Siachen and Sir Creek would be "dead" if there was another major attack on Indian soil in the next year.

(S) 5. Comment: PM Singh has once again put his reputation on the line to push forward with peace talks with Pakistan. Thus far there is public and private support for Singh's actions, but there is a low margin for failure if Pakistan does not come through with concrete efforts against terrorism. PM Singh's meeting with Musharraf also drew attention away from the fact that he was at a meeting with leaders of Cuba, North Korea, Iran, and Venezuela. The Prime Minister and other members of India's delegation to the Non-Alligned Movement meeting are scheduled to return to New Delhi on September 19th. Post will follow up with Indian officials in the coming days to monitor their reactions to the Singh-Musharraf meeting.

MULFORD